

Congress of the United States

House of Representatives

Washington, DC 20515

September 23, 2020

The Honorable Ralph DLG. Torres
Governor
Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands
Saipan, MP 96950

Dear Governor Torres:

Thank you for your letter of August 26, informing me that, unless Congress appropriates \$11,527,811 for the Commonwealth's Nutritional Assistance Program (NAP), you would begin reducing the number of households eligible for assistance and cutting benefits on October 1.

Although the decision to stop providing food assistance to some Marianas households and reducing benefits is yours alone, I ask you not to.

The people of the Marianas have been hard hit by the economic downturn caused by the coronavirus. As you note in your letter, the number of households eligible for federal food assistance jumped 46 percent between March and June of this year.

5,169 families now depend on this assistance. Taking it away from them, as you propose, will create a terrible hardship. Please, do not.

In asking you to be compassionate, I recognize that, as Governor, you must also deal with the fiscal realities of programs you administer. You project that without additional help from Congress and at your current rate of expenditure you will be entirely out of money after March of next year. I respectfully suggest you exercise your discretion and wait until you are closer to that time before taking the disastrous action of cutting off families from food aid.

Of course, it would have been helpful if you had told me of your need as soon as you were aware of the sharp increase in eligible households earlier this year. We might have added to the FY21 Agriculture appropriation of \$12.148 million for Marianas NAP, which the House passed on July 24, if you had not delayed.

Nevertheless, it is still reasonable to expect Congress will provide additional resources to you. I base this expectation on a number of factors:

1. The House of Representatives voted last night to include the Marianas in the Pandemic EBT program, created in Section 1101 of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act, Public Law 116-127. This amendment will allow you to apply for additional food assistance for families with children who have missed school days as a result of the pandemic.

The amendment is part of the continuing resolution to fund the government through December 11, which is expected to pass the Senate and be signed into law by the President. Speaker Pelosi and other House negotiators made this change after I informed them of the funding shortfall you reported in your August 26 letter.

Although the exact amount the Commonwealth will receive is subject to the plan that you will have to submit for approval to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, House committee staff estimate the amount will be between \$12 and \$16 million.

2. In recognition that the Commonwealth might need additional food assistance during the pandemic, the House of Representative included a special set-aside of \$1,822,000 for you in the HEROES Act, which we passed in May. Although Senate Republicans and the White House have resisted passing the HEROES Act, the President recently said he is now in favor of providing more pandemic relief funding.

His administration, also, concurs that Marianas NAP will experience a funding shortfall in fiscal 2021. After receiving your letter of August 26, I asked the Food and Nutrition Service in San Francisco for their confirmation of the \$11.5 million deficit you reported. FNS made no mention of this shortfall in the update on Marianas NAP finances, which they provided me on August 6. On September 3, however, the agency reported that, in fact, Marianas NAP would be short \$13.8 million in fiscal 2021.

As I said, I immediately gave this new information to my leadership in the House and fully expect it will be taken into consideration in their negotiation with the President's team over the HEROES Act.

3. I have repeatedly succeeded getting the funding needed to increase the number of Marianas households eligible for food assistance and to increase the benefits each household receives to the U.S. level. I increased funding in my very first term by convincing the Obama administration to match the food assistance increase provided states in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and succeeded in maintaining that increase in annual appropriations ever since.

I added \$32.5 million for Marianas NAP in the Agricultural Act of 2014. As you note in your letter, you are still using that money to make more households eligible and raise their benefits.

In last year's disaster relief act, Public Law 116-20, my floor amendment

resulted in \$25.2 million for Marianas NAP.

This year, in Section 1102 of the previously mentioned Families First Coronavirus Response Act and in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act we made another \$1.86 million available for food assistance in the Marianas. These funds are now available to you, but you did not account for them in your letter of August 26.

Governor, in the hierarchy of human need nothing is more important than having enough food to eat. That is why I have made food assistance a focus of my work in Congress. That is why some \$204,336,563 in Marianas NAP funding has been provided to the people I work for over the last twelve years. That is why the number of households receiving assistance has been able to double in that time and benefits have more than doubled, so, in the case of Tinian and Rota, they exceed the U.S. levels.

And this is why I ask you, again, not to follow through on your threat to cut aid on October 1.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kilili', with a stylized flourish at the end.

GREGORIO KILILI CAMACHO SABLÁN
Member of Congress